

JEFFERSON DAVIS

HISTORICAL ESSAY

By

Mrs. ALICE S. MORRISON

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Jessica Randolph Smith
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Alice S. Morrissey.

PRESIDENT

STONEWALL JACKSON CHAPTER, No. 20, U. D. C.
WASHINGTON, D. C.



THIS MEDAL WAS PRESENTED THROUGH THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED DAUGHTERS OF THE CONFEDERACY, BY JESSICA RANDOLPH SMITH IN MEMORY OF HER FATHER, MAJOR ORREN RANDOLPH SMITH, DESIGNER OF THE "STARS AND BARS," TO MRS. FRANK MORRISON, IN NATIONAL CONTEST, FOR HISTORICAL ESSAY ON JEFFERSON DAVIS.



Jefferson Davis



REAT men have lived and died, each striving for a cause, which he sincerely believed to be for the betterment of humanity and posterity. So lived and died the revered, beloved Jefferson Davis, honored, scorned, persecuted and pitied.

This great character, who wielded such a powerful influence in the stormy drama of the 60's, was a true exponent of Scotch-Irish Welch parentage, a race of great physical and mental strength, with natures of profound courage and tenacity, indomitable will power and great endurance.

Jefferson Davis was born June 3, 1808, in Christian County, now Todd County, Fairview, Ky. His mother was Jane Cook and his Welch father, Samuel Davis, a Revolutionary War veteran, who served as an officer when the thirteen original colonies fought for "Taxation with Representation," which resulted in a glorious triumph and the birth of this great nation, The United States of America.

Blood that flowed in the veins of Jefferson, had its origin in one, who had the courage of his convictions and would fight to establish them.

When a little chap of tender years, the parents of

Jefferson, moved to the state of Mississippi, in Wilkinson County, and here his father became interested in the cultivation of cotton, while the lad received a partial academic education at home. However, when very young, he entered the Transylvania University of Kentucky, and here, he remained until the age of 16 years.

His father, with the instinct of a soldier, desired that his son should have military discipline, therefore when leaving the university, Jefferson was commissioned by President Monroe, a cadet, to West Point Military Academy. Here he became a distinctive character in poise and personality, speech and ideals, among such classmates as Robert E. Lee, Joseph E. Johnston, Albert Sidney Johnston and others, whose achievements have won for them a lasting mark in the history of time.

In July, 1828, young Davis left West Point, having earned a second lieutenancy, and the regard and confidence of his associates.

He was a magnificent specimen of manhood, tall, strong and brawny in build, with a decided military bearing, a fine intellectual head, with a clear, high cut forehead and finely chiseled features. His courageous, quick step was ever ready for action, therefore, with those splendid requisites, he was destined to be a central figure in history and a leader of men.

With his ability and courage, he soon won a First Lieutenancy and Adjutant of a new regiment of dragoons, in 1833.

At this time the United States was having trouble with the Indians, and young Davis was active and took part in the Black Hawk war and the capture of the Chief, whom he held in captivity, and of whom, he won the esteem and affection.

Later, Lieutenant Davis, mustered into service volunteers from Illinois, whose Captain was Abraham

Lincoln, to whom he administered Lincoln's first oath of allegiance to this country.

After seven years of military service, Davis resigned and took up the growing of cotton in Mississippi, taking with him his bride, Miss Knox Taylor, daughter of General Zachary Taylor.

I understand the General was not in favor of this union, as he thought Davis young and unestablished; however, the couple were not long together, for within the year fever became prevalent and they visited in Louisiana to avoid an attack, yet Mrs. Davis succumbed and died, and Jefferson was very ill.

After his recovery, he travelled several years until stronger, after which, he returned to his plantation and books, and for eight years, he devoted his attention to the study of political philosophy and economy, public law and English Classics, and realized great wealth from his plantation.

In the year 1843, at the age of 35, he entered the political arena, as a democrat, with the doctrines of John C. Calhoun, a political power and influence at that time. Davis was well prepared for the field into which he had entered, and he too, with his personal magnetism and argumentative, fluent tongue soon became a power.

This same year he married again, Miss Varina Howell of Mississippi, granddaughter of Governor Richard Howell of New Jersey.

Politically active for two years, he was elected to represent his district in the House of Representatives, but resigned and took command of the first regiment, leaving his state, Mississippi, when war with Mexico was declared. In this conflict, he served under his father-in-law, General Taylor, in the Northern campaign, and General Taylor had every reason, and was proud, of the relationship, for Davis was a most daring, gallant soldier at Monterey and Buena Vista, for which

service, President Polk, offered him a Brigadier Generalship of Volunteers, which Davis declined.

After a service of two years, he returned to his home and reentered politics, filling a vacancy by appointment in the Senate, and later was reelected to that office.

By both parties in the Senate, Mr. Davis was highly esteemed for his gracious manner, purity of thought, and eloquence of expression.

His speech on establishing a government for Oregon Territory was famous. He argued that the government should protect an owner's property, no matter in what state; therefore, a negro slave fleeing to another state or territory was still the property of his owner, and Congress should recognize that ownership.

Debates on the Compromise Measures of 1850, he opposed with all his energy, while his colleague, Henry Stuart Foote, the other Senator from Mississippi was in favor of these measures.

In 1851, he resigned from the Senate and was a candidate in his own state for governor, on the Democratic States Rights ticket against Senator Foote, the Union Democrat candidate.

During his campaign, he temporarily lost his eyesight, which prevented his personal canvass, so naturally the governorship was lost by a small majority.

Still highly regarded and sought for his ability and information, he received the appointment of Secretary of War, under President Pierce in 1853, and his duties and obligations were executed with unusual skill and permanent benefit to the growing nation.

Jefferson Davis was a likeable man, as well as an able one, and he made friends in all circles, thus in becoming a member of the official family, a strong friendship developed between him and President Pierce. He did have an influence with the President, but Pierce too, had a strong will, yet he did support

the Kansas-Nebraska Bill of 1854, which Davis greatly favored.

After his term of office as Secretary of War expired, he was returned to the U. S. Senate and he influenced his party, to advocate the Federal Government's protection of slavery in the Territories.

On the floor of the Senate, he consistently stood for States-Rights and argued the right of Secession.

When his state decreed the right of Secession, he resigned his seat from the Senate and his impassioned farewell speech to his fellow colleagues was a most pathetic, appealing one. His parting words were:

"A state finding herself in the condition in which Mississippi has judged she is, in which her safety requires that she should provide for the maintenance of her rights out of the Union, surrenders all the benefits (and they are known to be many), deprives herself of the advantages (they are known to be great), severs all the ties of affection (and they are close and enduring) which have bound her to the Union; and thus divesting herself of every benefit, taking upon herself every burden, she claims to be exempt from any power to execute the laws of the United States within her limits.

"Then Senators we recur to the compact which binds us together; we recur to the principles upon which our government was founded and when you deny them, and when you deny to us the rights to withdraw from a government which, thus prevented, threatens to be destructive of our rights, we but tread in the path of our fathers, when we proclaim our independence, and take the hazard. This is done, not in hostility to others, not to injure any section of the country, not even for our own pecuniary benefit but for the high and solemn motive of defending and protecting the rights we inherited and which it is our sacred duty to transmit unshorn to our children."

Thus departed Mr. Davis from the Senate never to return.

The approaching feud between the North and the South seemed inevitable, and the seceding states prepared.

On the 25th of January, 1861, Jefferson became major-general of the forces of Mississippi.

He was a soldier and his heart's desire was to fight for the Southland, but when the states, one by one seceded and established a provisional government, calling it the Confederate States of America, and unanimously elected Mr. Davis to be the President, he accepted the honor and privilege to serve his people in any capacity, he seemed best adapted, with the hope of establishing a new nation.

With his fine, well trained, logical mind, his courage and military experience and service, together with his knowledge acquired in the political field, combined with the service rendered in the House and Senate of Congress, as well as his term of office as Secretary of War, he was the one man best equipped for the office of President of the Confederacy.

At this crucial epoch in the United States' history, and, as President of this new government, Mr. Davis may have made some errors in his stupendous undertaking, who is he that would not have, but, when we take into consideration that which was accomplished under his leadership and guidance, we realize the genius of Mr. Davis.

In a short time factories sprung up in the South, a navy and army was raised, well trained and equipped, seemingly over night, and the most wonderful defense every known was made by the men, boys and women of the South, against an army much greater in size.

If this conflict between the North and the South had been a victory to the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis would have been recognized, as one of the greatest

men that ever lived; nothing succeeds like success, but it was not to be, and thus the main actor of that tragic drama of the 60's, was branded by his enemies, as a traitor, thrown into prison, bound by heavy chains and made to suffer untold hardships, because he, like his father, had had the courage of his own convictions, and endeavored to establish them.

After a long confinement, he was finally liberated, a broken man in health and form, but not in spirit.

He travelled abroad and devoted the remainder of his days to writing, and some of the most interesting books, reciting the history of the South, are the works of the President of the Confederacy.

Davis indeed was endowed with a wonderfully strong constitution, for he lived to be 81 years of age, in spite of his prison life and suffering, of which he has so well written, depicting the solitude of the prison and his only companion, the tiny mouse, that ate his few stray crumbs, the only living thing that ever broke the monotony of the long tedious hours.

Jefferson Davis died December 6, 1889, at New Orleans, La., leaving his wife and two daughters, Margaret and Varina Anne, known as Winnie Davis.

It is to be regretted, that of all those who took part in the struggle to establish the Confederate States, Jefferson Davis, the elected leader, was the only one who lived and died, denied the right of citizenship to the United States of America.

With ability we derive distinction and honor, disfavor and sacrifice, and pay the penalty of failure, whether entirely responsible or not. However, the posterity of the South should be taught to love and cherish the memory of the man who gave his all, for the South.

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